

St Croix County Jane Doe 2002

Success Stories



Alyce Peterson

DNA Doe Project identifies Jane Doe found in Wisconsin in 2002 Skull discovered by Boy Scouts belonged to 92-year-old Alyce Peterson

Houlton, WI – Twenty three years after the skull of a woman was found in a plastic bag in Houlton, Wisconsin, the DNA Doe Project has identified her as 92-year-old Alyce Catharina Peterson. Peterson had died in hospital of natural causes in St. Paul, Minnesota, fifteen months prior to the discovery of her skull in Wisconsin. Investigators are currently working to ascertain what happened to Peterson's body after her death.

On October 21, 2002, a group of Boy Scouts walking through the woods in rural Wisconsin found a skull inside a plastic bag. A forensic examination determined that the skull belonged to a woman of Asian, Asian Pacific or Native American ancestry, who was between 35 and 60 years old when she died. It was also revealed that she was missing all of her teeth by the time of her death. Investigators believed that she had died around 12 months before her skull was found.

The St. Croix County Sheriff's Office brought this case to the DNA Doe Project in 2021, and a DNA profile was soon generated for the woman known only as St Croix County Jane Doe. This profile was then uploaded to

the GEDmatch and FTDNA databases, which revealed some surprising information. Rather than being of Asian or Native American heritage, the unidentified woman was Caucasian. Specifically, she appeared to have recent Swedish ancestry.

“We were surprised to discover through DNA analysis that St Croix County Jane Doe was of Swedish descent,” said co-team leader, Robin Espensen. “This unexpected result turned out to be a huge new lead. In particular, a woman living in Stockholm ended up being crucial to solving this case.” This woman in Stockholm was the only DNA match to the Jane Doe closer than a fourth cousin. DNA Doe Project researchers built out her family tree, focusing on the distant relatives of hers who had immigrated to the US. But there didn’t appear to be any missing people in her family, while research was also complicated by people changing their names after arriving in the US.

One of those people was a great great granduncle of the match, who changed his name after moving to the US in the 1890s. He married a fellow Swedish immigrant in 1902, and together they had seven children. The team realized that some of his descendants had moved to the city of Stillwater, Minnesota, just a few miles from where the unidentified skull was found. Extensive research revealed no missing people in his branch of the family either, but there was one possibility left.

One of his children was Alyce Catharina Philen, who was born in 1909. She became Alyce Peterson upon marriage, and she was a longtime resident of South Dakota before her eventual move to Stillwater. She was still a resident of Stillwater at the time of her death in 2001, and the team realized that the timeframe for St Croix County Jane Doe’s death matched up with the timing of Alyce’s passing, though she was much older than the age estimate.

The team informed the St. Croix County Sheriff’s Office of the Stillwater connection and asked whether one of Alyce’s living nieces would be willing to take a DNA test. Investigators then contacted a niece, and she agreed to test. Weeks later, her DNA results came through – she shared roughly 25% of her DNA with the unidentified woman, consistent with an aunt/niece relationship. This prompted further DNA testing, which confirmed that the woman formerly known as St Croix County Jane Doe was, in fact, Alyce Peterson.

"This is the first time that I have seen a Doe identified as someone who had a death certificate and who was supposedly cremated," said case manager, Eric Hendershott. "The fact that Alyce's skull ended up where it did was a real shock, but I'm glad that the team was able to identify her and reunite her with her family."

The DNA Doe Project is grateful to the groups and individuals who helped solve this case: the St. Croix County Sheriff's Office, who entrusted the case to the DNA Doe Project; Astrea Forensics for DNA extraction; HudsonAlpha Discovery for sequencing; Kevin Lord for bioinformatics; GEDmatch Pro and FTDNA for providing their databases; our generous donors who joined our mission and contributed to this case; and DDP's dedicated teams of volunteer investigative genetic genealogists who work tirelessly to bring all our Jane and John Does home.

Description

On October 21, 2002 Boy Scouts found a skull and mandible in a plastic bag in a wooded area of a Boy Scout camp near Houlton, Wisconsin. A forensic examination revealed the skull was of a female aged 35 to more than 50 of Asian, Asian Pacific or Native American ancestry. The woman had short (between 2 ½ to 3 inches long) mousy-brown hair, and she was missing all of her teeth at the time of death. Her height, weight and eye color could not be estimated. The female had widely spaced eyes, a flat face, and a pronounced forehead. Investigators speculate the skull had been deposited at the site within a year of discovery.

NamUs ID: UPg106

Date Body Found: October 21, 2002

Race: Asian

Gender: Female

Estimated Age: 35-60

Estimated PMI: 12 months

Location: Houlton, WI

Agency of Jurisdiction

Wisconsin Department of Justice / St. Croix County Sheriff's Office

Sally Standaert and Brandie Hart

715-377-5808

sally.standaert@sccwi.gov

Link to More Information

<https://www.namus.gov/UnidentifiedPersons/Case#/g106>

<https://www.sccwi.gov/443/Unidentified-Person>

https://unidentified.wikia.org/wiki/St._Croix_County_Jane_Doe

<http://www.doenetwork.org/cases/406ufwi.html>

Status: Identified

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